

Message Text

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ACTION EA-09

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 PM-04 H-02 INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00

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DLOS-04 OFA-01 /064 W

----- 010522

O R 051102Z MAR 76

FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9665

COMIPAC HONOLULU

RUHQHQA CINCPAC HONOLULU

INFO AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR

AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE

DIA WASHDC

AMCONSUL SONGKHLA

C O N F I D E N T I A L BANGKOK 5135

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: EWWT TH

SUBJECT: MERCHANT SHIPPING IN THE GULF OF THAILAND; INCIDENTS
INVOLVING SMALL ARMS FIRE

REF: (A) STATE 053366 (042222Z MAR 76) (NOTAL)

(B) COMIPAC HONOLULU HI 041040Z MAR 76

SUMMARY: THE INCIDENTS REFERRED TO IN REF A MAY WELL HAVE
INVOLVED IRATE FISHERMEN WHOSE NETS THE MERCHANT SHIPS
THREATENED TO DAMAGE, OR HAD DAMAGED ALREADY. GIVEN THE DENSITY
OF MERCHANT SHIPPING AND FISHING IN THE GULF OF THAILAND,
THREE INCIDENTS HARDLY CONSTITUTE AN ANTI-MERSHIP POGROM.
THE EMBASSY VELIEVES IPAC'S WARNING (REF B) THAT ANY SHIP
APPROACHING FISHING VESSELS IN THE GULF OF THAILAND CAN EXPECT
TO BE FIRED ON IS UNDULY ALARMIST AND MIGHT ADVERSELY AND
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UNNECESSARILY AFFECT INSURANCE AND LABOR RATES. END SUMMARY.

1. THE NAVAL ATTACHE RAISED THE THREE RECENT SHIPPING INCIDENTS (REF A) WITH THE FOREIGN LIAISON DIVISION AND THE DEPUTY COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF THE ROYAL THAI FLEET MARCH 5, AND AN EMBASSY OFFICER DISCUSSED THE PROBLEM WITH THE LEGAL DIVISION, TREATY AND LEGAL DEPARTMENT, MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS. THE APPROPRIATE OFFICIAL IN THE MINISTRY OF COMMUNICATIONS WILL BE OUT OF TOWN UNTIL MARCH 8. THE ROYAL THAI NAVY HAD RECEIVED LIMITED INFORMATION ON THE FIRST TWO INCIDENTS, AND HAD NOT HEARD ABOUT THE THIRD. THE FOREIGN MINISTRY OFFICIAL WAS COMPLETELY UNAWARE OF THE PROBLEM UNTIL WE RAISED IT, AND HAD TO MAKE INQUIRIES.

2. ACCORDING TO THE RTN, THE BANGKOK HARBORMASTER, WHO COORDINATES ALL MERCHANT MARINE ACTIVITIES UNDER THE MINISTRY OF COMMUNICATIONS, HAD RECENTLY REPORTED RECEIVING NUMEROUS COMPLAINTS FROM THAI FISHERMEN THAT MERCHANT SHIPS TRANSITING THE GULF OF THAILAND WERE NOT RESPONDING TO LIGHT SIGNALS AND WERE NOT AVOIDING FISHING NETS AND OTHER GEAR RIGGED FROM THEIR BOATS. THIS PRACTICE FREQUENTLY DESTROYED NETS AND OTHER EQUIPMENT AND ENDANGERED THE FISHERMEN'S LIVES.

3. GIVEN THE DENSITY OF BOTH SHIPPING AND FISHING IN THE GULF, WE SURMISE THAT THIS SITUATION HAS OBTAINED FOR A LONG TIME. WHENEVER THE FISH ARE RUNNING THE MOST COMMONLY USED SHIPPING LANES IN INTERNATIONAL WATERS, THE FISHING FLEET WILL BE THERE TO TRY TO CATCH THEM. ANY MERCHANT SHIP THAT MAINTAINS AN INADEQUATE WATCH, OR WHOSE RADAR FAILS TO PICK UP THE SMALL FISHING BOATS, OR WHO FAILS TO CEDE RIGHT-OF-WAY TO PRIVILEGED VESSELS, RUNS THE RISK OF RUINING SOME FISHERMAN'S NETS OR BOAT.

4. WHAT IS NEW TO THE SITUATION, APPARENTLY, IS THAT MANY FISHERMEN SEEM TO HAVE ACQUIRED FIREARMS, PROBABLY FROM REFUGEES ESCAPING FROM CAMBODIA AND VIETNAM. NOW, INSTEAD OF SHOUTING IMPRECATIONS AT THE OFFENDING SHIPS, THEY CAN PROTEST MORE SHARPLY. IT IS ALSO POSSIBLE THAT ON OCCASION FISHERMEN USE THE FIREARMS AS A SIGNAL, WITHOUT ANY HOSTILE INTENT.

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5. THE RTN OFFICERS WITH WHOM THE NAVAL ATTACHE HAS SPOKEN CANNOT ENVISION JUST WHAT "THAI MEASURES" THEY COULD IMPLEMENT TO "BRING THIS SITUATION UNDER CONTROL." THEY ARE OPEN TO SUGGESTIONS, HOWEVER. IT IS NOT ILLEGAL FOR A THAI FISHING VESSEL TO HAVE SMALL ARMS ABOARD, OR TO TEND NETS IN THE SHIPPING LANES. FINDING THE ONE OR MORE INDIVIDUALS WHO MAY ACTUALLY HAVE FIRED ON A MERCHANT

SHIP FROM AMONG THE HUNDREDS OF FISHING BOATS SAILING FROM HUNDREDS OF SMALL FISHING VILLAGES ALONG THE THAI, KHMER, MALAYSIAN AND VIETNAMESE COASTLINES IS UNDERSTANDABLY BEYOND RTG ENFORCEMENT CAPABILITIES, IF NOT ALSO THEIR MANDATE.

6. DESPITE THE TIGHT NAVIGATIONAL SITUATION IN THE GULF OF THAILAND, WE FIND THE IPAC COMMENT IN PARAGRAPH 3 OF REF B TO BE EXAGGERATED AND UNDULY ALARMIST. IN PARTICULAR IT MIGHT ADVERSELY AND UNNECESSARILY AFFECT INSURANCE AND LABOR RATES IN THE AREA. WE HAVE NO EVIDENCE THAT FISHERMEN OR OTHERS ARE TAKING RANDON POTSHOTS AT MERCHANT SHIPS. THE RECENT INCIDENTS PROBABLY MEANS THAT THE FISH ARE IN THE SEA LANES. WE WOULD PREFER TO HAVE THE IPAC WARNING AMENDED TO URGE MERCHANT SHIPS TO TAKE EXTRA PRECAUTIONS VIS-A-VIS BOATS FISHING IN THE SEA LANES, SINCE FISHING BOATS MAY FIRE ON MERCHANT SHIPS CUTTING THEIR NETS OR WHICH THEY BELIEVE ARE LIKELY TO CUT THEIR NETS.

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